

PREFACE

For as long as there have been societies, there have been various groups that did not agree with the generally accepted standards and laws. More or less organized groups of protest have always existed. They usually differ only in their purposes – from their fight against the government and its policies to attempts at gaining money and power. It is worth examining gangs, a special type of these reactionary groups.

Recent scientific research proves that gangs are becoming more and more active in different aspects of social life, unfortunately in a negative way. Crimes are more frequently being defined as gang-related. Some of the existing gangs in the USA count over 250,000 members. It is interesting that, in the common consciousness, there is a trend to focus only on Latin and Afro-American groups. It appears, however, that Asian gangs, for example, commit more crimes and are better organized in their structure.

DEFINITION

There are four ways of defining the word "gang"¹:

1. An organized group with a leader,
2. A unified group that usually remains together during "war" times as well as in "peace",
3. A group whose members express a sense of mutual unity through clothing, language, haircuts etc.,
4. A group whose activities are criminal or threatening to the larger community.

Experts say that young, under-educated people, lacking prospects for good jobs, usually form gangs. Such groups, in their opinion, present an alternative to boredom, hopelessness, and especially poverty.

HISTORY

Gangs first appeared in the USA in the 19th century. As a result of a deteriorating economic status and a growing population, gangs began to "specialize" in crime. After the Civil War, because of the continuous influx of immigrants, there was an increase of gang members, especially Italian, Afro-American and Irish. Chinese gangs appeared in California in 1850, while Philadelphia, at the same time, became home for over 100 different gangs. This period in American history is connected with a huge escalation of violence. "During this time murder became a test of toughness

¹ *Juvenile delinquency and violent gangs in the USA*, <http://hausaufgaben.de/hausaufgaben/englisch/e0002.html>

and drugs became a part of the gang scene."² At the end of the 19th century, characteristic elements of gang clothing appeared.

In 1920 there were about 1,300 gangs in Chicago, the total number of members of which varied from 20,000 to 25,000. A few more things, besides the number of members, have changed. Most of all, gangs began to possess more and more modern firearms, and did not hesitate to use them.

Some important changes appeared in the structures of gangs after World War II. First of all, the age of gang members decreased, the usage of firearms increased and organization structures became stricter. Common consciousness, concerning gangs as a social problem, has also changed.

The 1950's have been characterized by the growth of fights between gangs in such cities as New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles and Cleveland. They frequently fought for their women. Gang members considered the guarding of their honor as the gang's duty. At the end of this period girl gangs appeared.

During the 1960's many gangs changed the sphere of their activities. The level of gang violence decreased, while their activity in the drug trade increased. Immigrant ghettos, which traditionally are the "hatchery" of gangs and gangsters, became more and more crowded during the 1980's. It was for this reason that gang territories became no bigger than a single block or street.

In gang history and evolution, one can distinguished two "families" that constituted the roots of present-day gangs. These are Californian and Chicago gangs. Groups that became known as "Black P-Stone" appeared in the 1960's in the Chicago area. The gang, led by Jeffery Fort, had an extremely strict structure. It grew very fast, day after day absorbing smaller groups till it became the most powerful one. When the new leader came into power, the gang changed not only its name, to "El Rukns", but also established new and stricter contacts with prisoners. The group's biggest rival was "Black Gangster Disciple Nation"—a group, led by David Barksdale that also appeared in the sixties. After his death in 1974, the leadership was taken by King Larry Hoover and King Jerome "Shorty" Freeman, who divided the group into two new organizations: the "Black Gangster Disciples" led by King Hoover, and the "Black Gangsters" led by "Shorty". Even incarcerating the leaders did not stop them from running their groups from within prison. "Black Gangster Disciple Nation" developed its own set of rules called "Follow and Obey all Laws the King Sets" or "F.O.L.K.S.". For this reason they began calling themselves "Folks".

The "Vice Lords" was one of the oldest gangs, too, mostly formed by Afro-Americans with strong Islamic influences. On the basis of these two ("Vice Lords" and "Folks") groups appeared a new organization called "People". Like the "Folks", the "People" quickly gained nationwide status.

Two Californian gangs that became a model for modern groups, called "Crisp" and "Blood", appeared in the sixties, like most American gangs. Gangs were always one of the biggest problems in California, particularly in Los Angeles. According to police records, almost half of all committed murders can be qualified as gang-related.

² Ibidem.

TYPES OF GANGS

1. Traditional street gangs with an established organizational structure, e.g. "People", "Folks".
2. Territorial street gangs-similar to the traditional type but without an organizational structure, e.g. "Crisp", "Bloods".
3. Prison gangs, the organization of which was established in prisons.
4. International networks, such as the contemporary mafia.
5. Domestic terrorists that teach hate.

STRUCTURE OF GANGS

Gang structures vary. The biggest gangs that count thousands of members divide into smaller groups called clubs or cliques. The task of the club is to acquire more territory for a gang, and cliques are expected to win over and unite new gang members. Some gangs operate informally; the leadership is given to whoever wishes to take control. Some have strong leaders and a strictly organized structure.

There are four categories of gang members:³

- a leader who is usually an older member with a long criminal history. He possesses leadership qualities and is the worst of the gang;
- hardcore members-individuals whose sole purpose in life is to be identified with a gang. This is done by extensive participation in criminal behavior;
- marginal or fringe members-individuals that drift in and out of gang activities. They connect themselves with a gang but are not involved with the gang's everyday activities. They are not aware of all of the gang's operations. They do not like the status and recognition that the gang gives them.

And the last category of gang members is the "wannabe".

"Within the wannabes there are many little brothers and sisters, sometimes referred to as peewees. They are usually between the ages of 10 and 12. Peewees write graffiti on notebooks, lockers and school bathroom walls and look up to the gang members. These youngsters sometimes feel an extra special need to prove their malevolent side, their courage and fearlessness, and reportedly have been known to act quite ruthlessly."⁴

WHO BECOMES A GANG MEMBER, AND WHY?

The statistics are very pessimistic. Every day about 2,700 babies are born into poverty, and they are usually trapped by it till the end of their lives. Over 2,000 students drop out of school, 250 youngsters are arrested for various crimes, and 1,700 are abused by their parents.⁵ Moreover, unemployment among teens was 19% in 1993; five years earlier it was only 15,3%. In 1992, there were 14,6 million children living below the poverty line. It is not so difficult to describe the surroundings gang members come from. These are overpopulated surroundings with a high unemployment

³ Sgt. M. Longo, *Gang information*.

⁴ *Latino street gang organization*, www.csun.edu/~hcchs006/8.html

⁵ *Juvenile delinquency and violent gangs in the USA*, <http://hausaufgaben.de/hausaufgaben/englisch/e0002.html>

rate and without any social services. Young people join gangs because it is a source of easy money. Selling drugs and illegal weapons, robbery – these are basic sources of gang money. Another reason for joining gangs is to seek protection or to follow an older sibling's path. Gangs, especially for immigrants, seem to be the easiest way to meet friends and gain acceptance in a strange society. Speaking a different language and having a different cultural background, they have problems adapting to the new situation.

There are about seven reasons why young people join gangs:⁶

- 1) protection;
- 2) friends' acceptance;
- 3) money, drugs;
- 4) control of environment;
- 5) racial similarities;
- 6) cultural similarities;
- 7) common enemies.

MEMBERSHIP

Gang members are mostly teenagers. This is why one may ask if they can be fully responsible for their activities. This leads to the question of whether they should be treated as immature kids, or strictly according to their crime, with full responsibility. One-option supporters say that youths should be punished. In contrast to this opinion, others underscore the need for education and therapy designed to prepare teenagers for re-entry into the community. Statistics say that more crimes are committed by older teenagers (17–19 years old) than any other teenage group. A large majority of teenage criminals come from broken families and/or single-parent households.

CONCLUSIONS

"To understand gangs one must understand the cities and local communities where gangs are found."⁷ It is not easy to get rid of gangs. The efforts taken for many years by local and federal governments are still futile. Most programs established for fighting gangs focus only on creating alternative places for youths to spend time. But these places and attractive programs are not enough. The most important thing is to encourage gang members to participate in the planning and staffing of these programs. More research needs to be conducted to increase our knowledge of effective gang prevention and intervention programs. The point is not in creating these places and programs, but, most of all, in stimulating young people's interest in them. What seems interesting to the program creator is not necessarily experienced in the same way by young people. Without more effective intervention by social welfare and social control agencies, gang problems will worsen. Parental training and counseling, as well as early remediation and support in school, would help curb the worst effects of the gang problem.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ *Why do young people join gangs?*, www.stedwards.edu/educ/eanes/whatare.html

On the other hand:

"the problem of youth street gangs in urban areas is not only devastating to the community, it is also very expensive. The cost of gang-connected law enforcement, trials, various judicial proceedings, imprisonment and/or rehabilitation programs is all being underwritten by the taxpayers at a very high premium."⁸

In some way we are all responsible for gangs as parents, as citizens, and as humans.

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⁸ *Police and community perspectives*, www.csun.edu/~hcchs006/17.html.